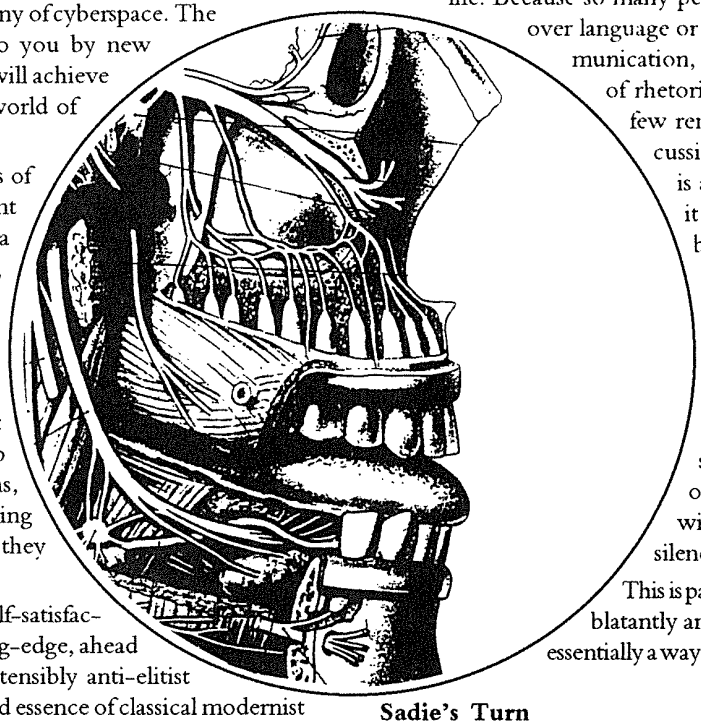
Cyberdrivel

Cyber theory: The Most Radical Gesture or even more post-modernism?
***Mike Peters** dissects the current vogue in technological utopianism.*

Mundane 2000

It was bound to happen sooner or later: a precise inversion of the Society of the Spectacle. But only from California could the news have come saying that sitting in front of a VDU could be a kind of revolutionary action. Like the return of the repressed, that great hit show is repeated: Counterculture II: the Sequel, but this time the Revolution not only will be televised, it will *only* be happening on the screen. The streets and shopping malls, the city tower blocks, the cops, the armies, the banks, the cars, the forests and the seas and the wastelands of the ghetto, indeed the entire human and animal population will vanish at a keystroke into the ether as mind meets mind in the epiphany of cyberspace. The mystical metaphysics brought to you by new SciFi metaphors-taken-literally will achieve lift-off into a transubstantiated world of pure spirit.



Cyberculture has all the makings of the perfect religion for the current stage of capitalism. The dogma comes in handy-sized sound bytes, not occupying too much brain-space. You don't even have to 'believe' the phrases, as long as you know how to use the right words. You don't even (in fact this is the whole point) have to *think* about their implications, whether they 'refer' to anything actually happening, or whether they are (snigger here) 'true'.

It offers its members the smug self-satisfaction of being an elite at the cutting-edge, ahead of the pack, while mouthing ostensibly anti-elitist statements. It contains the distilled essence of classical modernist progressivism: a single formula positing a past/present/future according to which a technologically-determined super-reality is evolving itself, and us, into something wholly new, wholly amazing and wholly irresistible: something just too unpredictable, except of course, that the self-appointed cybergurus have had a privileged peek at it)

It can even offer 'subversive' pretensions too (as optional extras) for those who want to shock with (they hope) blood-curdling declarations of the *abolition of Humanity, Identity, Life as we know it* etc. and a (safely abstracted) aura of radicality -purporting to transgress, deconstruct, supersede, a supposedly traditional/hierarchical/centralised/patriarchal/western (but, NB, not a capitalist) order of things, whilst being exactly identical to where capital is driving to at the moment; nobody is going to ask you to specify the difference between capitalism's programme and what cyberprophets are saying.

As a religion in every sense, the *tone* is all-important. Incantations uttered in entranced voices with uplifted hearts, and that cloyingly sanctimonious combination of in-group fellowship and pity bordering on contempt for gross heathens who haven't seen the light.

One of the social conditions making possible the diffusion of this religion is the disappearance of practical intelligence from social life. Because so many people no longer have any control over language or any means of autonomous communication, they are unable to resist the force of rhetoric or to hold their own in those few remaining farcical pockets of "discussion" in modern society. But there is a deeper contradiction at work - it isn't just that cybertheorists have become seduced, addicted or corrupted by language: driven to keep spinning slick catchphrases to keep up with what they need to believe is an irresistible imperative. There is a real fear of language at the heart of this whole spurious 'counterculture'; this fear of language unites those who speak with those who can only gawp in silence.

This is paradoxical because cybertheory is so blatantly an entirely *linguistic* phenomenon - essentially a way of writing and speaking.

Sadie's Turn

For the last few years the academic music-halls have been entertained by the double-act of Sadie Plant and Nick Land. Like a kind of Beavis and Butthead of the radical milieu, they gaze at the screen muttering their cool infatuation with what is being shown. Student clones easily replicate the style; not everyone gets the chance to be taught by TV gurus, after all. Situating themselves, mouse in hand, as expert pontificators on the very latest media fads, they deserve to be challenged by people who know something about where they are coming from and who don't like where they are headed. If this polemic is impolite, that's because I think what they are saying is abysmal and that it needs to be contested as sharply as necessary rather than treated with the mindless adulation of fans or the skeptical condescension of ignoramuses. As it happens, I like Sadie very much and readers will

know that she's been part of the *Here and Now* matrix for some time, but that doesn't stop me feeling it's about time she was asked to respond publicly to criticisms of the positions she's taken up. There's no tabloidist urge to kick people off their fifteen-minute fame-pedestals (even if they've shown a disturbing lack of reluctance to being used as talking heads), but there is a desire to know what they think they are up to and an impatience with the evasive assertions and refusals to accept the validity of questioning of their assumptions. As for Nick Land, I've never met him in the "flesh" (obviosuly an irrelevant consideration in this instance) but my view of his "thought" is explicit below.

The following commentary is not, of course, a critique of Cybertheory as ideology, even less is it a critical analysis of the 'information-communication-technologies' on which this ideology has erected itself. It's an attack on the *language* (and the dubious 'ideas') of cybertheory, on what this language inadvertently tells us about the people who (re)produce it, and on what it *does*.

Historically, the relationship of technofetishist intellectuals towards their images of the "future" has always been essentially masochistic. As part of the very fixation with 'power' (what technology will supposedly enable "us" - the first person plural is always a lie) - there is at the same time a kind of yearning for some force larger than themselves to which they can exult in abject *submission* - what Vaneigem would describe as self-sacrifice- the elementary form of substitutionism; here what is evident in cybertheory (the addiction to 'intellectual' technologies) is a kind of voluntary sacrifice of the intelligence as well as the familiar self-abasement of intellectuals beneath the wave of 'Power'/'Progress' which Orwell already diagnosed so acutely in the 30s.

Nick Land's Body

Nick Land is a fanatic for the most extreme forms of this submission. Behind his revulsion at the infuriating materiality of the everyday world is a desperate desire to escape his ordinariness. Going one beyond his role model the famous shit-eating librarian Bataille, Land extrudes from himself textual shit, and wallows ecstatically in his exteriorized abjection, working himself into a frenzy of surrender to the force that propels forth his own verbiage.

Some samples for those not familiar with the riffs:

> *A cybernegative circuit is a loop in time, whereas cyberpositive circuitry loops time 'itself', integrating the actual and the virtual in a semi-closed collapse upon the future. Descendent influence is a consequence of ascendently emerging sophistication, a massive speed-up into apocalyptic phase-change. The circuits get hotter and denser as economics, scientific methodology, neo-evolutionary theory, and AI come together: terrestrial matter programming its own intelligence at impact upon the body without organs = 0. Futural infiltration is subtilizing itself as capital opens onto schizo-technics, with time accelerating into the cybernetic back-wash from its flip-over, a racing non-linear countdown to planetary switch.*
>
> *('Circuitries',* ***Deleuze & the Transcendental Unconscious,*** *1992)*

> *In the final phase of human history, markets and technics cross into interactive runaway, triggering chaos culture as a rapid response unit and converging on designer drugs with increasing speed and sophistication. Sampling, remixing, anonymous and inhuman sound, woman become cyborg and taken into insanity: wetware splices with techno... Sudden transition from ice to water, phase change, punctual anastrophe of the system, is impact on convergent rather than metric zero. The earth is becoming cyberpositive"*
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> *('Cyberpositive',* ***Unnatural: Techno-theory for a contaminated culture,*** *1994)*

OK, it may sound better than it looks, and yes, Burroughs and Gibson did this too (but better), but contrary to those who say you don't need to try to read it word by word, just let it wash over you, it does -unfortunately - *mean* something; the message is only too clear.

It's the voice of the *Media*, made up of commanding barks, techno-noises (it needs the soundtrack to work), journalistic juxtapositions (how many trendy terms can you get into a single sentence?), and above all, and perfectly audible: the ever-authoritative sound of *Science*. This is a peculiarly anti-biotic poetry, redolent of 1920s-style constructivist machinespeak, with the singular difference that it now endorses an existing unconscious system logic rather than artistically metaphorising a possible one.

Like some latter-day eschatoholic he can't wait to be dissolved into the coming chaos. Everything is underpinned by an emphatic inevitability: "it can't be stopped"..."we haven't seen anything yet"...etc.

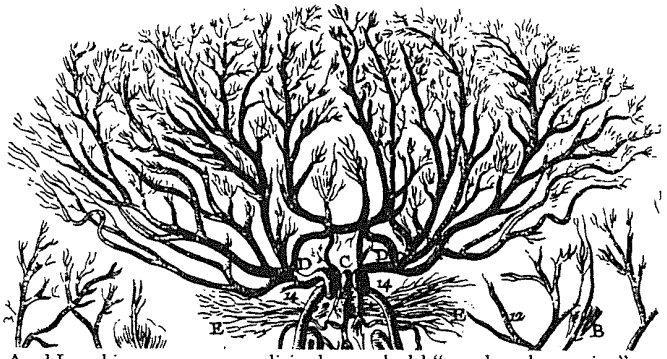
> *Life is being phased out into something new, and if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem.*

But such inevitabilities are secretly willful. Every "historical necessity" discloses an unacknowledged volition: Land's impatience with the messy business of being alive.

His linguistic style arouses the same revulsion I have always felt for the fascist mentality, as expressed in its futurist thrill at the sheer destructiveness of technology and its glamourization of movement and speed as such. It's now exactly 60 years since Benjamin grasped how humanity's self-alienation had "reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order".

Land's barely-concealed death wish makes me feel more than a little queasy. For such people 'liberation' always means dissolution, the form taken by aggression among males who, through physical weakness or infirmity, have had to displace their drives into cerebral channels. Normally such cod-psychoanalysis is hardly relevant but some people are so obviously acting-out their fantasies that these things seem inescapable. The clues are all there in Land's vocabulary, sentence-structures, even the stress-patterns in his speech and the physical gestures while speaking. (You see something similar among callow Trots whose hectoring speeches and power-fantasies are so blatantly phallic.) Land's impatience to be rid of his shameful body is typical of the *ressentiment* of the academic whose violent language and theoretical rigour are proportionate to their physical (and moral) cowardice. Radical politics has always had more than its fair supply of people whose blood-curdling 'radicality' (in words) goes hand in hand with the most abject conformity and craven submissiveness (in personal behaviour). Current academic fashion for "discourse on the body" is noticeable for this inability to deal with the most obviously bodily things: sensuality and pain. Land's heart cries against the strangulated anti-humanism of his own rhetoric, but

he can't even hear his own meaning. And all the impatience, the hatred and bitterness condensed in the word "human" goes beyond anything explicable in terms of mere critique of the accumulated ideological heritage of "humanism". The more he ferociously closes off the possibility of return from this avant-gardist supranormality, the higher the penalty his mundanely human body must pay.



And Land is not so postpolitical: good old "market dynamics" are a big part of the wonderful fluidifying turbularity, and he swallows current management baloney about "competition-compelled institutional flattening and fluidification". There's no sucker like a trendy sucker.

Nor, when it comes down to it, is the Land/Plant message quite so different as it would claim from American soggy hippy cyberpie-in-the-sky techno-utopianism. The mysticism (ever the B-side of scientism) is unashamedly evangelical: in these end times only the new edge elect will undergo the rapture. They really think they are picking up signals from the future. That's all right then, fellow-believers. Amazing grace is at hand. The old slanders against religion were never quite fair: no actually-existing religion ever so literally deferred salvation to an after-life or so blatantly refused to address the here and now so much as this breathtakingly smug digital death-wish doctrine. Those who babble about cyber revelation in a language *designed explicitly to abstract away everyday life* obviously find the taste of the corpse in their own mouths preferable to the thought of the suffering bodies whose absence from their discourse indicates their irrelevance in their grand scheme of things.

The "subversive" pretentions of this pseudo-anarchist technofascism lie only in the by-now-hackneyed rhetorical glamourization of supposedly negatively-loaded words like "viruses", "jungle", "chaos", "schizophrenia" etc. It's pathetic that they think they are being dangerous to celebrate gibberish as revolt. You have to be deeply academic to get turned on by deviant syntax. But the semantics are utterly conventional, and even the ontology is binary. 'Positive' is a "good" term (just as it is in management psychobabble), along with "integration", "convergence", "warm", "liquid" etc.

The "bad" terms are the usual suspects. Chief among them the "stable security structures" (turn in your grave, Reich) which stupidly conflates the State and the Self at such a safe level of abstraction that to fight against oppression is identical to the state defending itself. Resistance is itself a "paranoid" category, obviously.

Yet they can't hide the glaring contradiction between the chaos theory they invoke and their mechanical, modernist use of it: the 'anarchist' message they are claiming to read into all this comes down to nothing less than the old depressingly crass equation of 'chaos' with 'disorder', (willfully overlooking the very theory of chaos). Even after those nasty "stable security structures" have dissolved, there will still be zones of Order. The 'control' they declare to be impossible can still, and most likely will, be intolerably oppressive. With chaoticians like this one hardly needs cybernetics.

The difference between Sadie Plant and Nick Land is that the former confuses philosophy with technology, treating ideas as if they were the same as the things they are about, while the latter confuses writing with biology, imagining that his own literary assemblages are evidence of something new and wonderful happening in nature. She may be trying to convince herself that cybertechnology will bring a new life. He doesn't seem to consider that all his verbiage might just decode into a recognition that it will bring about his own disappearance. For their own sakes they'd better both be wrong.

Posthumanism - the new consensus

Donna Haraway's now-classic provocation "I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess" posed the typical false alternatives on which all this trendoid pseudo-radicalism depends. For a start, the cyborg option is just as phoney as the goddess one and is, from the point of view of desire, indistinguishable from it. And secondly, the suppresssed choice really being refused is that despicable third option of being *human*, the objections to which are the most interesting to disentangle. All the ideological blather accumulated over two centuries by the word human has been fixed fast by the hardening spray of academicism, so that 'human' is the one thing *all* intellectuals are united in despising, even though most of them have forgotten which particular reason led them to the refusal in the first place.

"Human" is, surprisingly, one of the few demonstrably nonproblematic intellectual categories. It takes an extremely academicized mind to be able to train oneself to *not* understand what everyone else cannot fail to know, and what academics themselves, with breathtaking hypocrisy, know full well in their everyday practice. But "academic" practices, by definition, exclude the very possibilities of correction by "common sense" ... so, for example, one can blithely get away increasingly with shit like this, since you don't have to prove it on equal terms. And handpicked cronies can surround you in the bar to echo back your self-inflated ego. Step outside into the night for just a moment, and it all collapses.

The negative connotations associated with the vocabulary of "humanism" derive ultimately from the *structuralist* ideology which captured academic theory in the seventies and was *retained* intact in the post-structuralist turn of the eighties. These connotations have now passed, by a familiar idiotic recursivity, onto the word "human" itself which (again contrary to the precepts of the ideology itself) has nevertheless been accepted as "referring" to "real" humans. The upshot is that human beings are now understood by those who think of themselves as the most radical, subversive thinkers around, in all seriousness, to be defunct.

One begins to understand *why* these cybertheorists refuse, on point of principle, to engage in debate and discussion: these inept fallacies might get spotted. No problem: the disappearance of education and knowledge in the postmodern corporate university will protect them from exposure: if the publications continue to fill the CV nobody will ask to read them.

So, the human body is just too boring for words. So desperate is this vanguard for something *new* that it is forced to recycle the shopworn clichés of modernism:

Deitch, in a typical, if only moderate, instance of this, says:

> *Our transition to the post-human world of cyberspace...is occurring gradually. Many of the new attitudes towards the body and the new modes of social behaviour...demonstrate a decided trend towards a radically new model of the self and of social behaviour..that is likely to make society...ready...for the truly radical technologies that are soon to come.*
>
> *('Post Human' in Fetherstone & Burrows (eds)* ***Cyberpunk/Cyberspace/Cyberbodies.*** *1995)*

Rucker, more pompously, says:

> *Genetic engineering and nanotechnology...offer us the possibility of literally being able to change our bodies into new and different forms...a form of postbiological humanity can be achieved within the next fifty years.*
>
> ***(Mondo 2000: User's Guide to the New Edge,*** *1993)*

This statement, whilst more 'extreme' than the preceding (and more reified -in positing changes in 'real' bodies, rather than changing ideas about the body), is typically American in its touchingly naive and unreflective faith that change is always 'progress' (i.e. always more of the same old triumphal frontierism, in other words no change at all) and in its imprisonment within the very 'humanist' conception that technology is simply about enhancing, extending and empowering the human subject. So he refers to 'post-biological humanity' while others talk of a 'post-human' world. Unlike the great utopian Fourier who declared that people in the future could grow tails (the notorious *archibras* for which he was ridiculed by his literal-minded critics), today's bio-futurists only demonstrate the atrophy of their own organs of imagination - they want different bodies but assume the same kind of society.

Brave New Flesh

The human body is evidently unbearable, especially to intellectuals and artists, whose social ambitions, now that "society" has been deemed out of bounds, are directed to restructuring it. How physiology might be re-engineered has exercised utopians for centuries. Biotechnology may soon be able to give our descendants wings, horns and tentacles, or as yet unimaginable organs and capabilities, but there are no such proposals forthcoming from cybertheory, which, true to its radical pedigree, can only envisage *abstraction, reduction, simplification,* and clearly think the body has too many organs already. They may talk about new possibilities but all they can come up with is even further impoverishment.

The much-sought-after complete abolition of the body as we know it is going to be much harder to achieve than many cultural theorists have acknowledged. Technology has hardly yet begun to tackle it. Fusion of biochemical and electronic processes with no other aim than to explore what it is possible to do with enough financial investment and scientific ambition will not be inhibited by embarrassment over past follies or ethical prejudices about whose interests are served by progress.

Current prospects go far beyond the crudities of yesterday's science fiction. Earlier collectivist visions of surgically-interconnected organisms -socialised respiratory, circulatory and nervous systems, centralising the limbs and other organs, belong to the Fordist epoch. Soviet scientists working along these lines, were, however, the first to graft an extra head on a dog. It is issues like this surgical joining of bodies that really separates the social forces today: the nay-saying sheep all cry halt, while the progressivist goats, seeing further, can only scorn their timidity. And yet it's the same old story. Modernism yearning to go beyond modernity forever.

No doubt present-day cyborgs will in their turn be ridiculed in the future, but who really cares about the future? Certainly not futurism.

> *The wireless body? That is the floating body, drifting around in the debris of technotopia: encrypted flesh in a sea of data. The perfect evolutionary successor to twentieth century flesh, the wireless body fuses the speed of virtualized exchange into its cellular structure. DNA-coated data is inserted directly through spinal taps into dedicated flesh for better navigation through the treacherous shoals of the electronic galaxy.*
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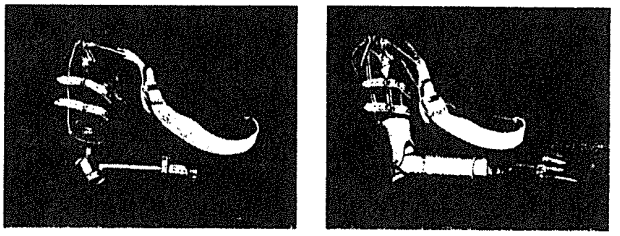
> *(Arthur Kroker/Michael Weinstein 'The Hyper-texted Body, or Nietzsche Gets a Modem', in:* **Data Trash,** *St. Martin's Press), 1994)*



Favorable news from the Fourth Reich: "The rota-arm (from Engineer Meyer of the Rotaworks in Aachen) is somewhat lighter and more agreeable than the Jagenberg arm. In its flexibility, it far exceeds that of the human arm." Here, the workaday arm with the adjustable working claw is juxtaposed with the Sunday arm with its attractive imitation hand.

Creating the body without organs requires abolishing that most recalcitrant organ: the mind. If, as critics of Artificial Intelligence insist, minds need bodies, then the reverse is true too.

> *Human brains are to thinking what medieval villages were to engineering: antechambers to experimentation, cramped and parochial places to be.*
>
> *(Land, 'Circuitries' op. cit.)*

Flickering in the background of this post-human cybernetic millenialism we can hear the echoes of a familiar optimism of "forces of production" evolving themselves behind our backs, like the old providence working in mysterious ways. What this tired old technolatry forgets, however, is that exterminism requires *effort.* If you want to annihilate yourself you have to *work* at it, and there, I'm afraid, is where I must part company with cybertheory. The zeal of the "expert", the "manager" is only too clearly discernable behind the vanguardist, countercultural gloss, and yet another silicon cage beckons ... if I wanted to top myself I would never be short of pre-electronic means already, so if you really want this way to go, what's to stop you switching your own fucking machinery off?

How to write cyberbabble. Impress your readers! Sound trendy. Cut that edge.

The rules are simple -
just follow these instructions and you too can be a

Cybertheorist!

Select any word from list A or B in combination with any word from one or more of the other lists and give that extra *post-futurist* gloss to your language.

A
Techno or Computer

digitally remastered
cyber-gigabyte
high velocity

B
Medical or Biological

surgical
viral
mucilaginous
mutation
immune system

C
Theological or metaphysical

truth
soul
sublime
transubstantiation

D
Pop Culture

Elvis
soap operas
comix

E
Political

activism
war
feminism
disinformation
security systems

Examples

digitally remastered feminism • imploding activism • metastatic truth mucilaginous soap operas • high velocity disinformation transubstantiation of technologies • surgical security systems imploding cannibalism

This easy to use system can generate titles for all your future conference papers and publications!